

Good is better

When we gaze too often and too long at the Dharma (such as in the suttas), the Dharma looks back at us. We hear the Dharma speaking to us not only in our silent moments, but even when we are fully engaged with the world. The Dharma voice tells us at once what's right, what's wrong.

Once we hear this voice, it is difficult not to obey it. For, if we do otherwise, this voice becomes louder and clearer, and the message more singular—this is what I should have done. Why didn't I do it? We begin to see the conditions that dragged us in the wrong direction. Now, we know we should have heeded that Dharma voice in the first place.

A simple practice of non-self teaching is to imagine we are not doing any actions but two voices are telling us what to do, we are simply carrying out their "orders." We can call the first voice, "Good," and the second, "Bad"; or to be more dramatic, we can name the first, "Dharma," and the other "Māra."

When we are confronted with a challenging situation, Good will tell us do this; Bad will countermand and tell us to do that. If Good has a louder voice, we will do the right thing. But often enough, Bad seems to win. Bad seems to thrive in noise and crowds. But, when we are left alone and in silence, we feel more at peace and hear Good's voice more clearly.

Then, we realize we should have listened to Good, in the first place. It's never too late because every time we act we have a second chance. When we listen too often to Bad's voice and obey, we forget we have second chances. We get caught in a vicious cycle like the uroboros eating its own tail. We are eating at ourself, and we wonder why it hurts! We listen to Bad, we hurt ourself—every time, and the habit worsens the pain.

Good has a gentle and sweet persuasive voice; Bad has a tough and rough threatening tone. The voice of Good is so gentle that it is easy to stifle it, but it is also so clear that it is impossible to mistake it. It's whether we choose to listen or not.

Often, Bad easily drowns out Good, especially when we are confronted with a difficult situation. When someone does something wrong or stupid—if we are attentive to Good's voice—we will tell that person he has done wrong or something stupid.

If we are teachers, especially Buddhist teachers, we find it easier to be a good speaker, than it is to obey Good and speak Good. We face so many difficult people, some very powerful, some very rich, some very pleasant, some we like very much. We find it difficult to tell them they are wrong. We rather listen to Bad's voice: "Don't say anything stupid: You will lose it!" Bad has a clever way of threatening, often confusing us. In fact, Bad often pretends to sound like Good. Then, we wonder: What did I do wrong?

Again, when we go back to our silent lone healing moments, we reflect how Bad has conned us, we are better prepared to listen more carefully to Good. It takes some courage to listen and do what Good says. The Buddha teaches us because he knows we have this courage, and wants us to be morally courageous -- to be brave in listening to Good and doing Good.

When we rightly tell someone who has done bad that he is wrong or silly, he will often not like it. However, when we allow Good to speak more loudly through us, and that person hears this voice, we have done the right thing. We have given Good a voice. The person may not be happy at first—but it is not “us” he is upset with: it is not “us,” but the voice of Good that he has not recognized. As soon as that person recognizes Good, he will see his own Good, and know that we have done the right thing for him.

If we let Good speak more freely, we are ever more blessed as we age. The voice of Good—the Dharma voice—speaks more naturally to us. This is a voice of both truth and beauty. Truth helps heal us and others; beauty makes almost everyone happy. We see truth and beauty in all our experiences, and wonder why we did not see this before!

Some of us may think we are crazy to listen to voices! They seem to be free from such voices. But that is a freedom without a purpose, without a conscience. What is freedom when we do not know what is Good and what is Bad, and choose wrongly? When we habitually choose Bad, we are not only going against ourselves but also against society: we will hurt others.

Let me end with a real story. Once, back in Malaysia, Ratna and I were moving house, and we were moving our things a bit at a time on her Honda Cub. She drove, I sat pillion holding on to the things. It was the law then that we had to wear helmets on the bike. We had been going back and forth—from the old house to the new one, and so on—that we forgot to wear our helmets!

Then, along the road Māra stopped us, and asked why we were not wearing helmets. It was only then that we realized that we had forgotten to do so—and that we have broken the law. Māra’s deputy asked in an ominous voice: “Do you want to settle this here, or do you want to come with us to face Yama? You will have a lot to answer for ... !”

At once, I replied, “I’m sorry, we are wrong; we have broken the law! Please take us to Yama, and we will face the music.” Suddenly, the deputy was at a loss. He asked Māra, “What shall we do with these two?” After an awkward moment, Māra said: “OK, we are letting you go this time. Don’t forget your helmets!” “Yes, Ma...!” I at once replied, relieved.

The voice of Good may be small and soft, but still it makes Bad uncomfortable and helpless.

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